

dances for the blue house



July 19 – August 6, 2006

BACKGROUND

Two Jewish-American choreographers and their New York-based dance companies are joining with German partners to launch a series of events that respond through dance to the historical events that led to the destruction of the European Jewish community during WWII. An 18-month planning period for a program of creative and educational projects began in the Fall of 2004 with meetings in New York City, and will culminate in performances, workshops and other public events centered in the towns of Breisach and Freiburg from mid-July – August 6, 2006. German high school students and dancers-in-training from Breisach and Freiburg will create and perform their own artistic responses leading up to the finale in Breisach.

During the week of January 27th, 2005, the 60th Anniversary of the Liberation of Auschwitz, the American choreographers Aviva Geismar and Jonathan Hollander traveled to Germany on a grant from the U.S. Government to present their project “Dances for the Blue House.” Dancers, students, teachers and community, foundation, corporate and government leaders offered to join the project, strengthening and expanding it into a truly bilateral effort. Together they have forged a joint approach to the exploration of a universal issue: how do the next generations of Germans and Americans respond to the Holocaust?

At the heart of this expansive program of international cultural exchange is *The Blue House* project of Breisach, that demonstrates poignantly and powerfully the actions individuals can take to change attitudes and air social and historical injustices in their communities. *The Blue House* is an old building which served as the gathering place for Breisach’s 300-year-



Battery Dance Company in “Secrets of the Paving Stones” by J. Hollander

old Jewish community up until the community’s demise. After decades of neglect and decay, the house was slated to be torn down in 1999. Instead, it was purchased by a group of community members, the Förderverein, and restored as a living museum and memorial. With the building as a base, the Forderverein searched for the survivors of Breisach’s Jewish Community and their descendents. These individuals have returned to Breisach three times at the invitation of the Forderverein and the town government, and have shared their histories with community members and schools. The Forderverein, in its endeavor to enlarge the scope of its programs, has invited Geismar and Hollander to develop this new initiative joining art and social consciousness.

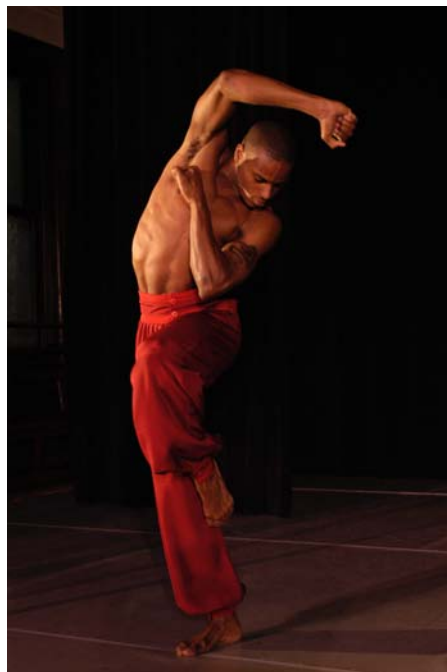
THE PROJECT

During the summer of 2006, the members of Battery Dance Company and Drastic Action will travel together to Germany. During week-long workshops at three high schools and one community center, the American companies will mentor local dancers and school groups. The sessions will take place over two weeks, with teams of teaching artists from both Companies working intensively with discreet groups of students. The sessions will culminate in a concert made up of two parts: Battery Dance Company and Drastic Action will present four dances that metaphorically reference Holocaust issues, and the local dancers and students will present their newly-created short works.

Both performances and educational workshops are designed to involve a broad cross-section of young people, professional dancers and the general public in the exploration of art, education, history and mutual understanding.

The dance companies and student groups from Freiburg will assemble in Breisach, the town which has served as the inspiration for the entire project. The American dancers and German students will perform in the Festspiele, take part in seminars with Holocaust scholars and survivors, visit the Blue House, and share their creative and educational experiences. Additionally, Aviva Geismar and Drastic Action members will work with a group of student dancers from the Breisach community, creating a special site-specific work that will be performed in the Blue House and on the streets that surround it.

The Breisach Festspiele, an open-air amphitheater located on the town's historic hill where Jewish families had lived since the 1300's, has emerged as the ideal venue for the project, and the local theater company has generously offered its use free-of-charge.



*Sean Scantlebury, Battery Dance Co.
in "Between Heaven & Earth"*

PROJECT PARTNERS & SPONSORS (as of October, 2005)

Breisach:

- Förderverein (Association of the Blue House)
- Mayor's Office
- Breisach Festspiele (theater company and amphitheater)
- Kunstkreis Radbrunnen (art studio)
- Volkschule (adult education center)
- Imagofilm Freiburg (independent film production company)

Freiburg:

- Carl Schurz Haus (American culture house)
- Gesellschaft für Christlich-Jüdische Zusammenarbeit (University of Freiburg Association of Christians and Jews)
- Lessing-Realschule (secondary school)
- Kepler Gymnasium (secondary school)
- Theodor-Heuss Gymnasium (secondary school)
- Badische Zeitung (newspaper)
- Musikhochschule Freiburg (music conservatory)
- Lutherkirche (Lutheran Church)

Frankfurt:

- Citigroup
- U.S. Consulate General

Berlin:

- U.S. Embassy

U.S.:

- Friends of the Blue House

THE ARTISTS AND THEIR WORK: Aviva Geismar Jonathan Hollander
Drastic Action Battery Dance Company

Geismar and Hollander are both well-known choreographers in the highly charged New York dance world. Between them, they have nearly a half-century of experience of making and presenting dances and teaching their art form to both students and professionals.

In the program of works curated for *Dances for the Blue House*, these two choreographers employ the medium of contemporary dance with distinctive handling, illuminating the broader resonance of historical events today.

The struggle against cultural and religious domination, the inheritance of multi-generational experience, the essence of loss and redemption and the fight to express individuality within a conformist culture are the themes which their dances investigate.



Drastic Action in "All Fall Down" by A. Geismar

Drawn together in response to the restoration of *The Blue House* and the passionate advocacy spearheaded by the Forderverein, Geismar and Hollander's contrasting voices touch and engage audiences around the potent but difficult theme of the Holocaust, and explore its relevance to our understanding of contemporary issues. In finding a common mission and through their respect for each other's work, Geismar and Hollander embrace the profound opportunities that *Dances for the Blue House* affords.



Aviva Geismar

Aviva Geismar's choreography is infused with an aesthetic sensibility that reflects her German Jewish legacy. Her grandparents grew up in the Jewish community in Breisach. After their marriage, they moved to Mannheim where they raised three children, including Aviva's father, Ludwig Geismar. In 1939, at age 18, Ludwig immigrated to the United States, but his parents were unable to escape the Nazis and died in Auschwitz.

As a first generation American, Aviva Geismar had no direct exposure to German culture nor the Holocaust, yet her dances gravitate toward tragic and un-resolvable situations and her movement quality is reminiscent of German expressionist dance. The collective unconscious that Geismar inherited finds outlet in her creative work. Some of her dances portray people struggling against insurmountable obstacles, while others grapple with issues such as victimization and conformity. All rely on a physicality of tension

and resistance, in which the dancers' pressure against the floor, the walls, and each other gives a charged urgency to their movement.

An increasing awareness of these features and themes, and a curiosity about how remote events give shape to her work are two factors which account for Geismar's interest in performing in Breisach and other European locales. In bringing dances that she created in a different cultural context to Breisach and other European venues, she will be able to experience her own choreography in a new way, explore its indirect sources, and share the ineffable influence of her family history with the European audience.

Geismar will present two works: *All Fall Down* and a solo excerpt from *The Unbidden and the Unhinged*. *All Fall Down* is an absurdist quartet which explores group dynamics, betrayal, and the ambiguity of interpersonal relationships. Through stomping rhythmical rifts and haughty feminine gestures, four women vie for dominance and power. Annabelle Chvostek's score create a surreal landscape in which their slippery alliances form and reform and their games veer dangerously out of control. Geismar's solo from *The Unbidden and the Unhinged* is a nightmarish tour de force, depicting a case of "Self vs. Self" in a social system gone awry. Twisting, lurching, and flinging herself through the space, Geismar seems caught in a world of unending counterarguments and tangled bureaucracy.

Both works exhibit Geismar's fascination with social systems and social attitudes toward violence. Given current political events in the U.S. and abroad, the work melds her personal legacy with issues relevant in many parts of the world.

Jonathan Hollander founded the Battery Dance Company in 1976, and since then has presented his work throughout the U.S., Middle East, North Africa, Eastern Europe, Scandinavia Pacific Rim, and extensively throughout South Asia. In 2004-2005, the Company has represented the U.S. as a cultural link with Vietnam for the 10th Anniversary of normalized relations between the two countries; as well as performing in Israel, Jordan, Hungary, Poland, Malaysia and Australia.

Hollander inherited the culture of his Polish, Russian and German Jewish ancestors through close relationships with his grandparents and extended family. Hollander began making dances that responded to the Holocaust and to more recent conflicts facing Jews and the State of Israel with the epic *Light from Dead Stars* in 1990. This was followed by *Lines are Drawn*, created during the Gulf War of 1991.

Four years later, he began a decade-long collaboration with choreographers, dancers and musicians from Poland. In 2003, Poland's leading contemporary dance institution, the Silesian Dance Theatre, awarded Hollander with the Silver Mask, its highest honor. Battery Dance Company has performed in 12 Polish cities, with repeat engagements in Warsaw, Kraków, Poznan, Bytóm and Slupsk. In September, 2003, the Villa Decius Foundation invited Hollander to stage a concert for the delegates of the European Conference on Tolerance in Kraków. Nine months later, Battery Dance returned to Poland to present the Opening Night performance for the U.S. Embassy's New New Yorkers Festival, the largest celebration of Polish/American culture in history.

In the European tour of 2006, Battery Dance Company will perform the quartet *Secrets of the Paving Stones*, one of Hollander's most recent work and perhaps his most poignant. With a powerfully evocative score by the Craców Klezmer Band as its springboard, and an atmosphere that was given form during a 10-day workshop in the Kazimierz district of Kraków, the home of the City's Jewish population from ancient times up until WWII, *Secrets* portrays the historic changes of the human spirit to which the cobbled streets of Kraków have borne witness.

Between Heaven & Earth, which was originally created for the European Conference on Tolerance, will complete the program. Set to another piece by the Craców Klezmer Band, this solo draws on West-Indian dancer Sean Scantlebury's raw energy to create a celebratory counterpoint to the nuances of *Secrets of the Paving Stones*.



Polish dancers in Hollander's "Hers & Histories"

Hollander had dreamed of performing in Breisach since he first visited the town in 1987 and learned from his long-time friend, Christiane Walesch-Schneller, about the history of the town's Jewish population. As they visited the desecrated remains of the Jewish cemetery, he understood that for her, these issues would not be put to rest. Hollander has been inspired by Walesch-Schneller's subsequent work in mobilizing the town around the rebuilding of the Blue House, and in affecting a rapprochement with Jewish survivors and their families.

PROJECT RATIONALE – Dances for the Blue House

Dances for the Blue House poses the following questions:

What can young people in Germany and the U.S., Jews and non-Jews, take from the events of the Holocaust?

How does an individual cope with tragedy, inherited, and present?

How does one pay respect to the victims of a tragedy?

Who is responsible for safe-guarding the lessons of WWII, now that the direct experience is passing into history, as survivors and perpetrators die?

When first-hand memory fades, what is left?

How and why could de-humanizing behavior become the rule of the day in a "modern" society?

What is the role of the artist in confronting unjust acts?

Does the artist have a special responsibility to speak about social, political, historical issues through his/her creative works?

How can a non-literal work of art communicate to audiences who lack special education or preparation?

Mankind has been affected by the Holocaust, and other tragedies throughout history. Do we learn and grow from these experiences? Do we evolve and become "better" in an ethical/moral sense than our ancestors?

If the echo of their voices become weak, we will perish... Paul Eluard

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